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ABSTRACT

The idea of increased interaction between university and school system, for the benefit of personnel and agencies involved, is an attractive one that has been given considerable attention recently. The author of this article, a university professor of special education administration, briefly describes his experiences as a consultant to the Dade County, Florida, public school system--a position that he held on a part-time, temporary basis. He asserts that field experience can provide invaluable material for enrichment of any training program for educational administrators. But the role of the visiting consultant should be well enough defined to avoid any conflict. (Author/DS)

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An Experience in University-School System Exchange

. . . from the perspective of the guest

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The idea of increased interaction between university and school system personnel, for mutual benefit of the personnel and agencies involved, has been given considerable attention recently as the process of personnel training has been under scrutiny. Various types of consortia and other mechanisms for insuring joint participation and communication between academia and the field of practice have been established, either as a requirement of state certification agencies or as a strongly emphasized criterion for judging quality and relevance of training programs by federal funding agencies. It seems fair to state that to enhance credibility in personnel training, evidence of close contact with and input from local education agencies has never been more highly prized.

The efforts of UCEA in conceptualizing the Partnership Project and seeking federal support for an activity which deals primarily with the development of mechanisms for facilitating such IHE-LEA interaction is a manifestation of this current trend applied to educational administration personnel training.

Among the numerous aspects of the Partnership proposal is the plan for possible exchange arrangements between universities and public school systems, whereby professors and school administrators might assume temporary assignments in roles "on the other side" from their usual professional domain. The expectation and objectives of such exchanges might be broad and varied, but would certainly include such mutual advantages as:

1. Providing professors of educational administration with a fresh exposure to current issues in the field of practice, in greater depth than the casual contacts provided by the placement and supervision of interns, short-term consultancies, and the like.
2. Allowing sufficent "immersion" in an ongoing system to permit a type of personal research involvement unattainable by ordinary research arrangements.
3. Providing the LEA with a "Professor in Residence" who can be called on to supply a fresh perspective to current administrative issues at a more intensive and extensive level than possible through customary short-term consultancies.
4. Providing university departments of educational administration with direct input from the field, in greater depth than possible in typical arrangements where practitioners are brought on campus for adjunct teaching.

It can be anticipated that the variety of exchange models would be great, and that the potential foreseen in each proposed arrangement would be idiosyncratic to the personnel and the agencies involved. But perhaps some guidelines for such exchanges can be specified, guidelines which would be useful to institutions and individuals considering the possibility.

My observations are based on an experience which approximates, at least to an extent, the type of exchange which would be made possible under the Partnership Project. This experience was arranged through individual negotiations, rather than as a part of any general program and therefore reflects the particular objectives and constraints of the parties involved. However, the circumstances would seem to have a fair degree of generalizability, and thus should make the observations drawn from the experience of reasonable utility.

The Plan

The writer, a professor of special education administration, was personally responsible for initiating and following through on the negotiation of a contractual arrangement whereby an academic year was spent assigned to the administrative staff of a major public school system, Dade County (Miami) Florida.

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The plan was developed to fulfill an objective of reimmersion in the reality of urban school administration, specifically as it bears on the administration of special education programs. Having been engaged in the professorship for ten years, and therefore ten years removed from previous tenure as a local special education director in a medium sized, suburban school system, a major consideration was also to gain first hand experience with the problems inherent in the larger urban systems. There was the personal belief that large urban systems constituted particularly important arenas for confronting today's major issues in special education service delivery, and that a professor of special education administration ought to be as well informed as possible about such settings. Furthermore, a scholarly interest in organizational questions raised by two-tiered, decentralized administrative structure made Dade County, the nation's sixth largest school system, an especially appropriate choice. The issue of how best to handle special education under administrative decentralization, is one which has been pondered by many of the larger systems, and has been the topic of one conference sponsored by the Council of Great City Schools and the U.S. Office of Education in 1973.

Eligibility for a sabbatical leave, which would provide a half salary for the year, and the anticipated contribution which the experience would provide to continuing professorial activity, made the prospects viable and attractive. Negotiation with the school system for a payment for consultant services rendered, supplemented the sabbatical stipend.

One condition which seemed important at the outset, and which proved to have bearing on the returns realized from the experience, should be noted. While an in-depth involvement with the school system was desired, it also was deemed important to reserve sufficient free time to devote to other, university-related activities and particularly to some writing for publication, the customary "product" of a sabbatical leave. Therefore, the contract with the school system called for direct involvement with the system for about three/fifths time during the school year. It was recognized that a part-time assignment might be hard to manage, but the importance of not becoming overwhelmed by the load of a full-time administrative role was seen as essential to the plan.

In negotiating the details of the official assignment with the school system, it was possible to isolate a number of activities and projects which were of particular interest to this writer and were also perceived by the administration to be worthy of the extra attention that a visiting, temporary staff member could provide. A role description was jointly prepared, setting forth the general scope of activities but leaving room for considerable flexibility in execution. At the beginning of the year, every available opportunity was taken to introduce the "visitor" and briefly explain the nature of his role to relevant groups of administrators and other staff throughout the system. It was recognized that in a system of this size and complexity of organization, communication regarding the nature of an atypically assigned role would be difficult and a certain amount of ambiguity would be unavoidable.

The Results

With the year's assignment now drawn to a close, it is possible to look back at some of the factors in the arrangement which facilitated and others which constrained its maximum mutual benefit. Some of the factors were peculiar to this time and place and would not be likely to happen again. However, suggestions for future practice can be made which would apply to almost any situation.

The flexibility of the relationship was beneficial in permitting the pursuit of interests which, within broad general parameters, warranted attention but could not have been precisely defined nor foreseen in advance. However, there were times when the looseness of the situation, and particularly the ambiguity of interpretation of the role by various other staff members, became an obstacle to maximum utilization of the time and opportunities available. As could be expected, perceptions of the role varied from that of "evaluator" to "advisor," "extra hand," "honored guest," and "intruder." Although the title of consultant was used officially, it was evident that this had different meanings to different people. In retrospect, it would probably be desirable to be even more specific in role description than was the case in this instance, and insure more carefully against mixed messages.

As expected, the part-time assignment proved awkward. Involvement in significant activities of an ongoing system is hard to achieve on the basis of three or four days per week. There were probably a number of instances in which the writer missed an opportunity for participation in something of interest and value because of absence on the crucial day, or because as a part-timer, he could not be expected to assume a significant role. In protecting his "private time" he was rendered somewhat impotent, compared to what might have otherwise been possible. How can the system take seriously a staff member who is only temporary, and part-time at that? In retrospect, it might be advisable to concentrate whatever time is to be spent in such relationships into a shorter, intensive, full-time assessment.

An aspect of this experience which presented an additional complication, but would be unlikely to occur frequently, was the circumstance of a newly appointed incumbent in the key administrative role with which the "visitor" was associated. As the first incumbent of a newly upgraded position of Director of Special Education for the County system, the last thing needed was an extra university professor looking over the shoulder of the new Director as he went about establishing himself and his own role in the system preparing for a long term incumbency. In this first year of a new administrative structure for special education in the system, time was needed to get things together and establish some relationships. While a consultant could be of help in this, there are probably times when a new leader needs to work independently, without

supernumeraries cluttering up the landscape. In retrospect, the best time for an exchange arrangement is probably *not* when a new appointee to a key related position has just come on board. It places an unreasonable burden on the new person, and creates a climate of "cautiousness" which constrains normal exercise of independent judgment and action, and thereby hinders full utilization of the relationship's potential.

Conclusion

The above reservations should not be construed as expressions of doubts about the validity of the idea of professorial sojourns in the practicing field. From a selfish viewpoint, the fresh exposure to the day-to-day problems will provide invaluable material for enrichment of the training program for special education administrators. There is no question of the benefit gained on that side of the relationship. The retrospective observations recorded above are set forth as suggestions to maximize the gains, and make them mutual for all parties involved. □